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Review of Binding Earth and Heaven: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism

Abstract

Lucas Johnston's study of the religious dimensions of the sustainability movement is an important example of the attempt by religious studies scholars to highlight the "religious" in unexpected contexts. Johnston looks closely at discourses of sustainability in three different types of sustainability movements: evangelical (creation care), interfaith, and secular "subcultures of resistance," with special attention to their concern for social justice. In so doing, he overcomes a common tendency to see these groups as having little overlap. Johnston convincingly argues that in their adoption of sustainability discourses not only are they remarkably alike, but the leaders of these movements explicitly borrow from each other. He describes their participation in a kind of network of sustainability discourse, especially those that "draw on the language of core values and deep beliefs. . . ." (18). What this cross-fertilization of values and practices suggests, Johnston argues, is that "sustainability is acting as a new metanarrative, a large-scale story that is able to weave together a wide variety of value sets"

Disciplines

Mormon Studies | Philosophy

Comments

This is a book review published as Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Binding Earth and Heaven: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Discourse of Early Mormonism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. In *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. 18:1 (2014) 115-117. doi: [10.1525/nr.2014.18.1.115](https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2014.18.1.115). Posted with permission.

extensive childbearing of Mormon women and absence of men on missionary runs.

The text concludes with appendices listing the random sample of blessings, examples of oracular and prophetic languages as well as a valuable thematic word index. The Shepherds are attendant to the limitations of their work, noting that it would be very difficult to study contemporary blessings. Some of their hermeneutic categories, such as “ultra-supernaturalism” are less helpful in analyzing traditions like Mormonism that challenge a dichotomy between matter and spirit. Nonetheless this is a strong and valuable work, especially in its core statistical analysis. While not suitable for a general introductory course, it would serve well as a methodological case study for advanced students, and certainly deserves attention from scholars of 19th century American religion, as well as scholars interested in the early phases of institutional development.

Christopher W. Chase, Iowa State University

Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment. By Lucas F. Johnston. Acumen Publishing, 2013. 224 pages. \$99.95 cloth. \$29.95 paper.

Lucas Johnston’s study of the religious dimensions of the sustainability movement is an important example of the attempt by religious studies scholars to highlight the “religious” in unexpected contexts. Johnston looks closely at discourses of sustainability in three different types of sustainability movements: evangelical (creation care), interfaith, and secular “subcultures of resistance,” with special attention to their concern for social justice. In so doing, he overcomes a common tendency to see these groups as having little overlap. Johnston convincingly argues that in their adoption of sustainability discourses not only are they remarkably alike, but the leaders of these movements explicitly borrow from each other. He describes their participation in a kind of network of sustainability discourse, especially those that “draw on the language of core values and deep beliefs. . . .” (18). What this cross-fertilization of values and practices suggests, Johnston argues, is that “sustainability is acting as a new metanarrative, a large-scale story that is able to weave together a wide variety of value sets” (167).

The heart of the book is the third and last section, “The Ethnographic Data and Sustainability Cases,” based on research with what Johnston calls “thought leaders.” Johnston’s interviews with evangelical, interfaith and secular sustainability advocates reveal the ways in which “sustainability” is a strategy that can be appropriated by different communities and individuals and given meaning in local as well as global

contexts. His case studies bring much-needed attention to conservative evangelicals' sustainability efforts. Here we find them promoting organic gardens and donating the proceeds to the homeless. If anything in the book deserves more sustained scholarly attention, it is this section on creation care, and especially these (often controversial within their own traditions) evangelical leaders' openness to drawing on scientific research.

By paying attention to particular configurations of religion, religious language and sustainability in local contexts, Johnston challenges those politicians and intellectuals, including scholars, who would promote a global environmental ethic out of touch with local communities' needs and desires. While Johnston wants to be attentive to (often hidden) power dynamics, nevertheless he focuses on the lives and messages of leaders with little sense of what kinds of tensions and conflicts take place between leaders and their constituencies. While he offers multiple accounts of sustainability's origins, nevertheless the historical context out of which sustainability movements emerged in particular locales is hard to grasp, in part because Johnston wants to make global claims, but most of his examples are from North America. Given the American context, more could be said, for example, of the back-to-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Like the sustainability advocates Johnston worked with, his argument is most compelling when he is talking about specific cases, rather than making generalizations about global trends. A substantial section of the book that analyzes the emergence of sustainability as a metanarrative is often hard to follow, with circular and repetitive arguments. The book would be considerably stronger if the ethnographic section had been expanded and the history of sustainability discourses reduced.

Finally, Johnston's claim that sustainability movements emerged amidst a "resurgence of religion" and that thus the two are closely related (70) is unconvincing. The book suffers from an overwrought insistence on the "religious work" that sustainability narratives "perform." Religious studies scholars' attempts to justify their excursions outside the bounds of what is usually taken to constitute religion need not be so heavy-handed. Johnston's richly drawn cases, even those movements and communities that are not self-consciously religious, speak for themselves.

Sarah M. Pike, California State University, Chico

Theos Bernard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life. By Paul G. Hackett. Columbia University Press, 2012. 520 pages. \$32.95 Cloth.

Tibetan Buddhism has gained media attention both within international diplomacy because of the Chinese occupation of Tibet for over